

Comments from JABA Readers

THE GREAT ESCAPE: PUBLIC BROADCASTING GOES BEHAVIORAL

Someone at our local public broadcasting station, KQED in San Francisco, must have read Brian Iwata's recent review of negative reinforcement (Iwata, 1987). For years, KQED, and presumably other PBS stations across the country, have raised funds to support programming through the dreaded of all events, the pledge break. During pledge week, regular programming is preempted in the ubiquitous search for funds. Instead of friendly oversized birds, engaging gorillas, tour de force acting performances, and Louis Rukeyser, we are greeted with banks of telephone-eared volunteers and the KQED broadcast team entreating listeners to send money to ensure that their admittedly great lineup of programs can continue. Fortunately, through the magic of videotape we can watch pre-recorded *Sesame Street*, but somehow it's just not the same.

The marketing geniuses of the station must have realized that their give-or-else approach was too punishing to the average viewer, who responded by escaping to video or commercial TV until it was safe to return. Undeterred, the marketing department has now come up with an ingenious plan which may, in fact, be utilizing negative reinforcement. KQED now enables viewers to avoid or at least postpone pledge breaks by contributing to the station's coffers before the breaks actually take place. The more the audience contributes, the fewer pledge breaks they must endure. And, if there is overwhelming support, the pledge breaks are cancelled entirely.

From a conceptual point of view, KQED's strat-

egy appears to fit the negative reinforcement paradigm (Hineline, 1977). Present are aversive stimulation (the infamous pledge break), the availability of a response (making a contribution), and a suitable contingency between the response and the stimulation (the more you give, the less you receive). Avoidance, in this case responding in the absence of the actual pledge break, is clearly an example of negative reinforcement. Or is it? As Iwata points out, it is not always a simple matter to distinguish whether a given contingency represents a case of negative or positive reinforcement. In the present illustration, are we, the viewers, contributing to avoid the pledge break (negative reinforcement) or to ensure the presentation of an uninterrupted flow of our preferred programs (positive reinforcement)? Further complicating the issue is the fact that the station is attempting to implement a rather large group contingency with a group peopled by individuals with an unknown behavioral history—some of us may actually, dare we say it, enjoy the pledge breaks.

This suggests an interesting experiment. Would viewers contribute more to see extra episodes of their favorite KQED programs (imagine a week of *Fawlty Towers*, for example), a positive reinforcement contingency, or to avoid or postpone the (non)stimulation of the pledge breaks? Although the exact nature of the contingency may remain unclear pending further study, the results of KQED's current strategy are anything but unclear. Whenever the viewership has had the opportunity to "prepledge" and avoid the break, they have responded by digging into their pockets en masse without missing a single episode of *Masterpiece Theatre*. Negative reinforcement just may be alive and well in San Francisco. Back to you, Robin.

REFERENCES

- Hineline, P. N. (1977). Negative reinforcement and avoidance. In W. K. Honig & J. E. R. Staddon (Eds.), *Handbook of operant behavior* (pp. 364-414). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Iwata, B. A. (1987). Negative reinforcement in applied behavior analysis: An emerging technology. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, **20**, 361-378.

CARL SCHRADER
SPECTRUM CENTER
MARK D. LEVINE
BEHAVIORAL COUNSELING & RESEARCH CENTER

Received March 14, 1988
Final acceptance September 6, 1988

Policy Statement

The **Comments from JABA Readers** section is designed to address topics of general interest to *JABA* readers. Such "comments" can focus on conceptual and methodological issues in behavioral research or can suggest new lines of research, identify new sources of funding, discuss specific tools of the trade for researchers or practitioners, present current or historical issues and trivia, or address issues raised in previously published articles.

Articles submitted to **Comments** will typically be reviewed by the Editor and one Associate Editor, who will evaluate the article largely *as it is* in determining whether or not it is of general interest to our readers. If the article is considered appropriate, it will be printed with only minor editing. Excerpts from reviewers' comments may occasionally be published as well. The final decision to accept or reject will rest with the Editor.

Manuscript Preparation

Submissions should be prepared in accordance with the following guidelines: submissions should be **700 words or less**; authors should submit three copies of the article; and each submission should contain a cover letter indicating the article has not been, nor will be, submitted elsewhere during the *JABA* review process.